

Writers consider the tense in which they write, making choices about verb tense and maintaining verb forms consistent with those choices. Here are some ways writers consider verb tense:

Present tense often gives a sense of immediacy. It brings the reader into the story. It hints at a sense of things being unresolved. It can create tension, since the ending appears not yet experienced by the narrator. It implies a voice that is, in fact, writing from the age and events described in the piece. Present tense can be snappy and lively:

We play every night from right after supper until it is dark and we hear our mothers calling, whistling, or ringing bells. Sometimes we play in our backyard, where there is a treehouse to hide in and a garage to run around.

Past tense often creates a voice that is marked by a sense of reflection, by a looking back on events in order to see and understand more, or in order to recover emotions or knowledge that has been buried. Past tense implies that the narrator has lived past these events and tells them now from an older vantage point. Past tense can be thoughtful and sometimes pensive. Past tense sometimes lets the narrator give foreshadowing from a position of greater knowledge than the character has in the story:

When Chris caught you in tackle tag, he lowered you to the ground gently, so that you lay in his arms for a minute, looking up at him through that tangle of yellow hair, the green lawn wet below you.

Sometimes writers change tense in order to change the mood. A shift from past to present tense can evoke a sudden shift in perspective or voice, from one that is contemplative or distant to one that is more animated, sometimes more dangerous or provocative:

Chris's hair was yellow, his eyes were blue, his bare arms and legs were brown. When his hard sixth-grade arms wrap around your fourth-grade body, holding you just off the ground, it is like nothing you ever knew before. It is something undomesticated.

A shift to future tense evokes still another perspective, one that shows time passing and a future that may be known, dreamt, or dreaded:

Mrs. Terhaar's lawn will lose its muddy spots where we slipped. The grass will turn gold, and then brown, and then we will say how cold it's gotten. We'll put on our school clothes, cover our legs and arms, watch our skin grow pale again.